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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES, DECEMBER 9 - 19

11. The "Almaty Notes" series is intended to maintain focus on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital" following the move of the Embassy to Astana.

CITY AKIM RECEIVES OPPOSITION LEADER ABILOV

12. The Almaty akim (mayor) Akhmetzhan Yesimov met on December 19 with Bulat Abilov, leader of the opposition party Azat, who asked that the city's central square -- the site of Kazakhstan's first anti-Soviet demonstrations -- be renovated and renamed from Republican Square to Independence Square. In 2007, the city administration began constructing a huge entertainment center on the square, a project that was heavily criticized by many public organizations and opposition parties. The recent economic crisis has stalled the construction. The akim told Abilov that the square would be renovated in the near future. This was the first time the Almaty akim received a representative from an opposition party.

RESIDENTS OF ILLEGAL HOUSING STORM CITY HALL

13. On December 10, approximately 40 protesters picketed the Almaty municipal administration building after the akim refused to meet with them. The protesters own houses in the Almaty suburbs that are scheduled for demolition. The Almaty administration contends that the houses were built illegally and must be demolished to make room for city expansion plans. The protesters were forcefully removed by the police and several leaders were arrested.

MORTGAGE HOLDERS STAGE RALLY ON INDEPENDENCE DAY

14. On December 16, Kazakhstan's Independence Day, approximately 400 Almaty residents took part in an unsanctioned rally on the city's main square to protest high mortgage payments and construction delays on their unfinished apartments. Representatives of the akim and the city's architect attempted to negotiate with the angry crowd, but police eventually forcibly dispersed the crowd. Talmas leader Aynur Kurmanov was arrested and sentenced to 15 days in jail for organizing the unsanctioned rally.

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